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NOTE

From:	Presidency
On:	6 May 2025
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Migratory routes from Central Asian countries

Delegations will find in annex a background note prepared by ICMPD with a view to the meeting of the EMWP on 14 May.

Based on this note, the Presidency invites delegations to consider the following questions for discussion:

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the key challenges and opportunities regarding cooperation with Central Asian countries on migration? What actions should be taken to balance the challenges (including the potential security concerns), while facilitating migration to meet labour market needs?

2. Should cooperation on migration governance between the EU and Central Asia be better integrated into broader diplomatic and economic relations?

ANNEX

Regular Migration from Central Asia to the EU: A Discussion Paper

Migration ties between the geographically distant countries of Central Asia (CA) and the European Union Member States (EU MS) have long been minimal, marked by limited exchanges and a sparse history of mobility – with the notable exception of migration in the 1990s, when, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, descendants of Europeans, particularly ethnic Germans and Poles, returned from the newly independent Central Asian states for family reunification and resettlement. Central Asian migrants have primarily been drawn to Russia due to shared historical and linguistic connections, and established networks. However, the impact on mobility caused by Covid-19 pandemic, the changing geopolitical landscape, with the manifold repercussions of the war in Ukraine[1] and Russia's renewed vigour in securitising migration policies, is prompting Central Asian migrants – driven by pre-existing structural push factors such as limited job opportunities, income disparities, and demographic pressures in their countries – to seek alternative destinations, including exploring opportunities in the EU.

This evolving dynamic occurs amidst the EU's stronger strategic engagement with Central Asia, as articulated in its 2019 Central Asia Strategy, which introduced a more holistic approach – compared to the 2007 EU-Central Asia Strategy – by recognising migration as an integral aspect of cooperation. In 2023, to enhance the 2019 Strategy, the EU and Central Asian countries jointly endorsed a roadmap, which includes the commitment to enhance cooperation on security issues, and also aims to strengthen people-to-people contacts and mobility, including educational exchanges, among other elements. Since 2022, high-level EU visits to Central Asia – and vice versa – have become more frequent[2] with the first European Union-Central Asia Summit, held on 3-4 April 2025 in Samarkand (Uzbekistan), and attended by European Commission President von der Leyen, European Council President Costa, and the Presidents of the five Central Asian states, representing a historic opportunity to discuss the broader framework of EU-Central Asia cooperation.

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1 Read more in the series of Prague Process Policy Briefs available here

2 Such as the high-level meeting between European Council President Charles Michel and Central Asian leaders in Astana, Kazakhstan, October 2022; the EU-Central Asia high-level meeting in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, June 2023; Josep Borrell's visits to Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic from 1-3 August 2024; German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Kazakhstan in September 2024.

The outcomes of this landmark Summit, alongside the Global Gateway strategy aiming to mobilize up to €300 billion globally in investments between 2021-2027, offer a significant opportunity to reshape migration patterns by addressing root causes through economic development and connectivity initiatives in Central Asia.[i] In addition to exchanges with Central Asia as a whole, people-to-people contacts are addressed during bilateral meetings between individual EU MS and individual CA states, whereas migration is discussed during bilateral Cooperation Committee Meetings held under the framework of (Enhanced) Partnership and Cooperation Agreements.

Migration Patterns and Trends

Migration from Central Asia to the EU remains modest compared to flows from other countries but has recently experienced rapid growth. In 2023, nationals of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan collectively held a mere 0.8% of all valid residence permits (VRPs)[ii] and around 2% of first residence permits (FRPs)[iii] across the EU. However, between 2014 and 2023, the number of CA nationals arriving in the EU surged nearly six-fold to 73,928, with the resident CA population in the Union nearly doubling to 195,866. The growth accelerated sharply between 2020 and 2023, with migration flows expanding by 335%. Consequently, the resident CA population in the EU nearly doubled to 195,866. Nationals of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – countries where jointly approximately one million young people (trend increasing) enter local labour markets annually[iv] – contributed significantly to this increase.

For many years, migration flows from Central Asia to the EU were largely driven by family reunification and educational pursuits, year-on-year accounting for around 60% of both issued and valid permits. A shift toward labour migration emerged in 2019, when work-related migration flows surpassed 30%. This trend gained momentum after 2021, as labour migration saw the fastest growth due to the post-pandemic rise in labour demand in the eurozone, while educational migration increased steadily but moderately, and family migration experienced minimal change. **By 2023, employment had become the primary reason for migration from Central Asia to the EU**, with over 73% of new arrivals coming for work. The key motivation to choose the EU is higher income[v]. Safety, stability, and respectful treatment are also among the important factors.

Central Asian migrants predominantly target a fraction of EU Member States, with *labour migration* heavily concentrated in Eastern and Central Europe. Since 2019, the list of key EU destinations has remained relatively stable, but the flows have been redistributed in varying ways. **Poland** represents the key gateway for most CA migrant workers, having issued between 30% and 49% of work permits to CA nationals annually, with a high share of mid-term (6-11 month) ones. **Lithuania** emerged as the top destination in 2023, granting over 36% of new work permits to CA nationals, mostly valid for 12+ months. **Hungary** represents another emerging destination, particularly for workers from Kyrgyzstan, who in 2024 benefited from Hungary's guest worker programme[vi] recruiting migrants in specific lower-skilled jobs. However, recent policy changes in both countries signal a more cautious approach and may result in redirecting flows elsewhere in the EU[3]. **Germany**, maintaining a steady role as a secondary destination, stands out as one of the few EU countries issuing Blue Cards to CA migrants – albeit their number remains below 700 per year (1% of Blue Cards issued to foreigners in Germany in 2023)[vii]. Other countries, such as **Czechia, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, and Bulgaria** attract smaller numbers from some CA states. **Bulgaria**, for example, issued the most authorisations for employing CA seasonal workers[viii] in hospitality and agriculture in 2023, particularly from Kyrgyzstan, while **Romania** regularly issues work permits to Turkmen citizens.

Across these countries, Central Asian migrants are primarily employed in construction, industry, agriculture, services, and transportation, filling positions that do not require high qualifications or language proficiency. Surveys with Kyrgyz workers in Slovakia[ix] indicate that migrants often manage without local language skills, relying on Russian-speaking networks and coordinators or similarities between Slavic languages[x]. But overall, basic English and local language proficiency is an important requirement and often poses a barrier to employment[xi].

3 Lithuania tightened residence rules and cut its 2025 foreign worker quota, while Hungary revised its guest workers programme, excluding CA states and reducing the total recruitment cap. Read more here, here, and here

The concentration of labour migration in a few EU Member States is driven by private employment agencies, which play a key role in facilitating the entry of CA migrant workers into the EU labour market due to the relatively recent history of migration from the region and the complex, time-consuming process[xii] of obtaining visas and work permits. Employment agencies licensed in Kyrgyzstan, for example, primarily direct migrants to the above-mentioned EU countries[xiii]. Some Central Asian workers are also stepping into roles previously held by Ukrainian male migrants, currently unable to leave Ukraine due to martial law. Moreover, Western European markets have opened to Ukrainians under the temporary protection, attracting seasonal workers who once headed to Poland[xiv], leaving vacancies in the labour market. Simultaneously, the traditional migration from Central Asia to Russia is under increasing strain, in particular due to Russia's restrictive policies adopted after the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack.[xv] In response to these shifting dynamics, Central Asian countries – guided by a policy of 'multi-vectorality' in their external relations – are now pursuing migration diversification strategies ever more actively, as evidenced by the growing number of bilateral agreements concluded with EU member states.[xvi]

Educational migration – with 10,450 first residence permits for educational purposes issued in 2023 (14 % of total FRPs issued that year) – remains the second most common reason for Central Asians to move to the EU. Arrivals of CA students grew over two-fold in the past decade, driven mainly by increased inflows from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Erasmus+ is a popular EU programme supporting short-term educational mobility between Europe and Central Asia, among other regions. Between 2022 and 2024, nearly 2,800 Central Asian students and faculty members participated in Erasmus+ exchanges, with 42% coming from Kazakhstan, 34% from Uzbekistan, and 15% from Kyrgyzstan.[xvii]. The geography of educational migration broadly mirrors that of labour migration and has seen little change since 2019. Poland, Germany, and Czechia serve as the primary destinations. Hungary, Italy, and France hold mid-tier positions, each appealing to specific student groups. Latvia and Romania attract Uzbek and Turkmen students, respectively, due to existing bilateral programmes between the two pairs of countries.

Although most of the migration from Central Asia to the EU is formal, irregular migration also occurs – either when migrants enter without adequate documentation or when they overstay. In addition, while migrants may arrive through available legal pathways, complex immigration and visa systems in EU Member States sometimes place high- and low-skilled migrants on different legal tracks. Low-skilled migrants are also more likely to engage in short-term migration, such as seasonal agricultural work, or to resort to irregular pathways, which increase their vulnerabilities and the risk of falling into the hands of traffickers along the route or in destination countries.

In relative terms, following the overall pattern of growing migration to the EU from Central Asia, irregular migration has also increased. In 2023, the number of Central Asian nationals found to be illegally present in EU Member States reached to 8,630 (up from 5,855 in 2022 and 2,730 in 2021) – reflecting an increase of 47% compared to 2022 – with the increase exceeding 50% for nationals of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan each.[xviii] About 2 million undocumented migrants were estimated to be residing in Russia in 2021[xix][4], and their potential irregular migration to EU countries should be taken into account.

Comparative Analysis of Central Asian States

Kazakhstan

Nationals of Kazakhstan, the most economically developed country in Central Asia, represent the most populous group of Central Asians in the EU, holding 84,878 valid permits in 2023. Half of them reside in Germany, predominantly on family reunification grounds, driven by past repatriation of ethnic Germans[xx] and marriage migration. Since 2015, education and employment have driven most migration flows, noticeably rising in 2021-2023.

[4] The true scale of irregular migration in Russia is hard to capture due to several factors, incl. existing free-visa travel between Russia and Central Asian states. In early March 2025, Russian authorities placed 685,000 foreign nationals on the newly created 'registry of controlled persons', a watchlist tracking foreigners deemed to lack legal grounds to stay in Russia. Read more in ICMPD Migration Outlook Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2025

In 2023, EU Member States issued close to 19,000 first residence permits to Kazakh nationals, 2.6 times as many as in 2014, and 44.5% more compared to 2021. In 2023, work-related permits surpassed all other reasons, with Poland emerging as the top EU destination, followed by Lithuania, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Germany. While Kazakh migrants tend to have higher levels of education[xxi] than other CA nationals and lead among Central Asians in EU Blue Cards[xxii], they also take up jobs across skill levels, including seasonal work[xxiii]. In Poland, most are employed in transport and warehouse management, industrial processing, wholesale, and retail trade[xxiv]. The majority of Kazakh labour migrants are men (over 70% of work FRP holders in Poland in 2023 and over 95% in Lithuania), aged 20 to 45[xxv]. Due to the lack of bilateral agreements on labour migration, most Kazakhs rely on private employment agencies (PEAs), both officially registered in Kazakhstan and unregulated online services[xxvi]. Recognising the risks of irregular migration and potential workers' abuse, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Labour is developing new rules targeting PEAs to enhance pre-departure training and worker protection[xxvii]. The country is also negotiating labour agreements with Germany and Latvia[xxviii].

Educational migration, the second most popular reason among Kazakh nationals migrating to the EU, is often seen as a steppingstone for long-term emigration[xxix]. Most Kazakh students head to Poland, Czechia, Italy, and Germany, with minor flows directed also to Hungary, France, and Spain. While Poland has been issuing most new permits, Czechia hosts the largest Kazakh student community overall. Education cooperation is among the key areas of the EU-Kazakhstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), which came into force in 2020. Moreover, Kazakhstan and the EU are negotiating a visa facilitation agreement, which may boost educational exchanges.

Kyrgyzstan

Until 2019, migration flows from Kyrgyzstan to the EU remained insignificant and evenly split between family, study, work, and other reasons. The resident Kyrgyz population in the EU remained stable at around 12,000-13,000 persons. In 2023, as in previous years, Germany continued to host the largest number of Kyrgyz migrants in the EU, most of whom reside on family grounds. Since 2021, labour migration has surged, with the number of Kyrgyz arrivals exceeding 16,000 in 2023 – 80% of which were for work – and expanding the resident population in the EU to over 32,000. Labour migration is ingrained in Kyrgyzstan's economy, with over 800,000 Kyrgyz nationals having migrated abroad for work in 2022[xxx], and the country regularly ranking among the top 15 global recipients of remittances as share of national GDP. In 2022 and 2023, Lithuania, Hungary, and Poland attracted the lion's share of Kyrgyz labour migrants heading to the EU, with Germany, Slovakia, and Bulgaria representing secondary destinations. Italy, once the top destination, continued to host a declining number of Kyrgyz workers. Recent surveys of Kyrgyz migrants confirm a growing interest in the EU as a destination, with Germany frequently named as particularly appealing[xxxi].

Most Kyrgyz labour migrants in the EU are men (97% of work FRP holders in Lithuania, 79% in Hungary, and 85% in Poland), aged 20 to 44. Despite a considerable share of Kyrgyz migrant workers holding higher education degrees, they often take up jobs that do not match their qualifications[xxxii]. In Lithuania, many work as international freight transport drivers[xxxiii]. Hungary has primarily recruited Kyrgyz migrants to work in the manufacturing sector, many through non-EU temporary employment agencies that assign them to different employers[xxxiv]. As with Kazakhstan, PEAs licensed in Kyrgyzstan, which have mushroomed since 2022, play a crucial role in securing jobs in the EU. In addition to Kyrgyz-licenced PEAs, around 15% of Kyrgyz migrants find jobs through PEAs of other countries (i.e. Kazakhstan and Ukraine). A similar share finds jobs through the Kyrgyz Centre for Employment of Citizens Abroad[xxxv], which has signed bilateral agreements with various recruitment agencies in Germany, Poland, and Italy[xxxvi].

Educational migration from Kyrgyzstan has grown fivefold since 2014 but remains secondary to labour migration, accounting for some 10% of the overall flow. Poland and Germany consistently rank as the top two destinations, followed by Hungary, Czechia, and Italy. Minor flows are also directed to Austria, France, and Spain. Poland has recently become the common entry point for Kyrgyz students; it has bilateral agreements in the field of higher education and science with all five CA states[xxxvii]. The University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw also partners with Kyrgyz universities, offering double degree programs[xxxviii]. In June 2024, Kyrgyzstan signed an EPCA with the EU[xxxix].

Tajikistan

In 2023, Tajik nationals had close to 19,000 valid and over 9,000 first permits in the EU, ranking behind Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Like other CA states, Tajikistan has seen a sharp rise in labour migration to the EU, increasing from 858 persons in 2021 to 7,544 in 2023. Conversely, educational and family migration remain low, at 7% and 5% of the total flow, with Germany attracting most Tajik migrants for both reasons.

Tajikistan relies heavily on labour migration, with remittances forming the highest share of national GDP globally[xl]. The country's growing population is the youngest in Central Asia: 35% are aged 14-30 and 130,000 young people enter the labour market each year[xli]. Limited domestic job opportunities push Tajiks to seek work abroad, with up to half of households having a migrant family member. In June 2023, Tajikistan adopted a new Migration Strategy until 2040 to enhance employment prospects for Tajiks abroad through training and language courses in English, Korean, and Japanese[xlii]. There is a growing recognition of the need to diversify migration destinations to reduce Tajikistan's heavy reliance on Russia.

Since 2019, Lithuania, Poland, and Germany have been top EU destinations for Tajik labour migrants, with the flows to Lithuania seeing the fastest growth. In 2023, Lithuania issued over 65% (or 4,931) of first work permits to Tajik migrants in the EU, up from 24% (668) in 2022 and 11% (96) in 2021. Poland was next with 914 work FRPs, followed by Romania, Hungary, Latvia, and Germany. Up to 96% of Tajik labour migrants in the EU are men, aged 20-35, working predominantly in low-skilled occupations. In Poland and Lithuania, most work in construction[xliii]. Job seekers from Tajikistan enter the EU through intermediary firms, mirroring practices in other CA states, as well as with the help of the Migration Service of the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Migration of Tajikistan[xliv] or individually. In Lithuania, they have reportedly been contacting the Lithuanian employment Service[xlv].

Turkmenistan

Compared to other Central Asian countries, Turkmen migration to the EU remains limited, though it has seen significant relative growth. Over the past decade, arrivals from Turkmenistan increased seven-fold, reaching 3,325 in 2023, with the Turkmen resident population exceeding 6,000 the same year. Employment became the primary migration driver, particularly as of 2020. Poland, Romania, and Germany represent the key EU destinations for Turkmen migrants, including migrant workers, with Poland issuing the most permits (2,566 FRPs in 2023, of which 2,474 were for work). Most labour migrants from Turkmenistan are men, aged 25-40. Family and educational migration from Turkmenistan remains minimal, at 10% of the total flow. In 2019-2023, Germany, France, and Italy hosted most Turkmens with family permits, while Romania, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Poland hosted most for educational reasons. Turkmenistan's educational cooperation with Romania is one of the few structured migration channels, with approximately 100 Turkmen students coming to Romania annually[xlvi].

Unlike its Central Asian neighbours, Turkmenistan imposes stricter migration controls and lacks private agencies to facilitate the employment of Turkmens abroad. However, foreign agencies that offer jobs in the EU to other Central Asian migrants – such as the agencies in Kazakhstan[xlvii] – are likely filling this gap.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has witnessed the largest increase in migration flows from Central Asia to the EU in absolute terms, driven by a sharp rise in labour migration. Between 2019 and 2023, work-related flows rose from 3,000 to over 22,000, making Uzbekistan the region's top labour-sending country to the EU. Uzbek nationals remain the second-largest group of CA migrants in the Union, after Kazakhstan, with their number exceeding 53,500 in 2023. While family and educational migration remain secondary to labour migration, these have grown steadily. Germany and Sweden are the main destinations for family reunification, while Poland, Germany, and Latvia attract the most Uzbek students. Italy is also among the top EU Member States issuing first residence permits for educational purposes to Uzbek nationals, with 234 permits in 2022 and 181 in 2023, ranking fourth overall. The presence of the Turin Polytechnic University in Tashkent is also an important achievement of educational cooperation between Italy and Uzbekistan. Each semester, around 25 Uzbek students from this university participate in international exchange programmes, going to other EU universities[xlviii].

Uzbekistan, Central Asia's most populous country, surpassed 37.5 million people in 2025[xlix]. With 650,000 young people entering the workforce each year and domestic job opportunities falling short, labour migration has become vital, generating USD 16.6 billion in remittances in 2024 (16.9% of GDP). Lithuania and Poland are the primary EU destinations for Uzbek workers, who are mostly employed in construction and as drivers. Increasing numbers also work in Croatia, Latvia, Bulgaria, Finland, and Germany, where the latter two, despite smaller inflows, retain Uzbek migrants longer, likely due to employment in sectors that require a skilled or long-term labour force.

Migration from Uzbekistan is more common among low-income, rural populations. Language barriers and the lack of skills limit their employment opportunities to manual jobs[l]. Uzbek migrant workers are mainly men aged 30-34. Most of them find jobs in the EU through employment agencies or private intermediaries. In 2023, Uzbekistan had a dozen licensed private employment agencies[li], along with the Migration Agency under the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan, which assisted Uzbeks in finding jobs abroad. A 2024 presidential decree set a gradual transition of organised employment to PEAs by early 2026 and encouraged language training in German, English, Korean, and Japanese[lii]. Uzbekistan's Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction operates a chain of *Monocentres*, offering vocational training to Uzbek citizens including those seeking employment abroad.

In 2024, Germany became the first EU state to sign a bilateral agreement with Uzbekistan[liii], streamlining skilled worker migration from Uzbekistan to Germany and the return of individuals without legal residency rights. Earlier that year, media reported that existing agreements with German employers could provide jobs for up to 50,000 Uzbeks in sectors such as nursing, truck driving, machinery maintenance, hospitality, tourism, craftsmanship, mechatronics, and construction[liv]. Uzbekistan, Central Asia's pioneer in the diversification of labour migration destinations, is actively negotiating new agreements. In early 2025 alone, Uzbek officials held talks with Slovakia, Croatia, the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists, and a Dutch recruitment firm on the recruitment and training of Uzbek workers[lv]. In July 2022, the EU and Uzbekistan concluded negotiations on an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, with the signing planned for 2025[lvi].

Implications for the EU

The increasing migration from Central Asia to the EU presents both opportunities and challenges for policymakers, requiring careful consideration of labour market needs, integration strategies, and regulatory oversight. Central Asian workers could help fill existing labour market gaps, but it would be important to ensure that their skills and qualifications match EU labour market demands. Most CA migrants, even those holding higher education degrees, are employed in lower-skilled positions due to credential recognition barriers and language limitations. Recognising this gap, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are taking steps to improve workforce preparedness. Additionally, EU-funded and ICMPD-operated Migrant Resource Centres – already functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with a new centre to open in Uzbekistan in summer 2025 – offer compatible solutions for pre-departure training, including in languages and soft skills.

Discussions about Central Asian labour migration should consider the adaptability of EU migration frameworks while taking into account the national competences in this regard. Beyond this, ensuring proper oversight of PEAs will be important to prevent worker exploitation including the risk of trafficking in human beings for labour exploitation and growing (online) fraud, especially as more migrants rely on intermediaries for entry into the EU labour market.

The Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity in Central Asia, launched in 2022 and significantly expanded in March 2025 with a €60 million package, represents an overlooked factor in migration governance.[lvii] The TEI on Digital Connectivity targets Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, being more advanced in the latter two countries. By providing satellite connectivity to 1,600 underserved villages across the region and reaching approximately 3 million people, this initiative could both reduce migration pressure by creating local opportunities and facilitate better-informed migration through digital skills development and access to information about legal pathways to the EU. In addition to digital connectivity efforts, the EU is also funding the PRIME Central Asia initiative, which aims to strengthen financial inclusion and boost digital remittances across Central Asian countries. This initiative supports the development of more secure, affordable, and efficient remittance channels, which can enhance local economic resilience and, over time, contribute to reducing migration pressures.

More broadly, enhanced EU-Central Asia cooperation on migration governance, in particular labour migration, can serve as a foundation for broader geopolitical and economic partnership. This opportunity comes amid intensifying competition for labour force with countries such as Japan, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, which have increasingly opened pathways for labour migrants from Central Asia, as well as Russia, which remains their primary destination despite complex political and socioeconomic realities.

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